

What do constituents want from their local MP?

Dr Nick Vivyan, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University

Dr Markus Wagner, Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Vienna, Austria

Voters want their MP to be independent from the party and focused mainly – but not exclusively – on the constituency. These are the results of a major new study that examines the kinds of MP behaviour and activities that constituents endorse.

Researchers from Durham University and the University of Vienna (Austria) have conducted a new study examining what kind of local MP voters want.

In an online experiment, a national sample of British voters was asked to choose between pairs of hypothetical MPs whose characteristics were varied.

The study finds that voters strongly prefer MPs who publicly dissent from the party leadership.

For example, voters were 30 per cent more likely to opt for MPs who sometimes speak out or vote against the party leadership than MPs who never do so. Voters were also 10 per cent more likely to opt for an MP who publicly voices disagreement with his or her party leadership than for one who raises concerns behind closed doors at internal party meetings.

How MPs formulate their policy positions also matters to voters. MPs who listen to the policy views of constituents are strongly preferred to those who follow their own beliefs and principles.

Constituents also want their MP to work hard – but not exclusively – on local constituency issues. Voters do not like MPs who spend the minimum possible amount of time on constituency issues. They most prefer MPs who spend three days of a typical working week on constituency matters and two days working on national policy.

Importantly, all of these characteristics mattered to voters even when asked to choose between MPs from different parties. When deciding on what type of local MP to represent them, having an MP from their party of choice is not the only consideration.

Key findings

Voters prefer MPs who:

- **demonstrate independence** from the party leadership,
- **disagree publicly** with their party rather than just privately,
- consider policy based on the **preferences of constituents** and less on their own beliefs and principles, and
- focus on **constituency service** at least as much as on **national policy work** at Westminster.

All these MP characteristics matter to voters, even when considered alongside MP party affiliation. MPs' **gender, age and tenure in parliament** are much less important to voters.

Detailed Results

This study examined data gathered from two YouGov surveys from December 2012 (survey 1) and September 2013 (survey 2). The surveys made use of a conjoint analysis design: participants were asked to choose between two hypothetical MPs who varied randomly in their age, gender and tenure in parliament as well as in their behaviour and activities.

The detailed results for the various MP attributes, illustrated graphically on the next page, are as follows.

Independence from the party line

In survey 1, independence from party was measured by how frequently an MP spoke out or voted against the party leadership. This attribute was found to matter greatly to voters. Even MPs who only rarely speak out or vote against the party are about 13 per cent more likely to be chosen as the preferred local representative than MPs who never do so. MPs who speak out or vote against the party either sometimes or often are over 30 per cent more likely to be chosen as preferred representatives than those who never do so.

In survey 2, independence from the party line was measured by whether, in the event of a disagreement with the party leadership, an MP did not speak out; spoke out only at internal party meetings; or spoke out publicly as well. Those MPs who speak out internally are almost 15 per cent more likely to be chosen than those who do not speak out at all. However, those MPs who speak out internally *and* publicly are over 20 per cent more likely to be chosen than MPs who do not voice their opposition at all. The public appears to value public displays of independence over private, internal dissent.

Basis of position on policies

This was measured by stating whether, when considering policy matters, an MP thinks about their own personal views or those of their constituents (this attribute was included only in survey 2). MPs who take their constituents' views into account are over 20 per cent more likely to be preferred by voters than MPs who consider only their own views.

Time spent on constituency or national policy work

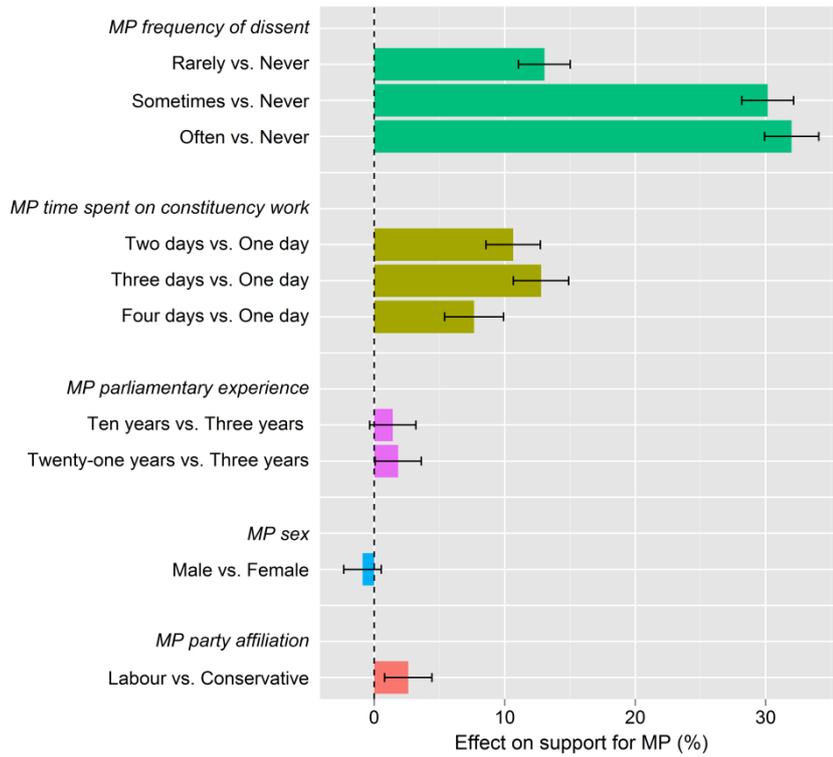
This was measured by comparing the number of days of a five-day week the MP typically spent working on local constituency issues, with the number of days per week spent reviewing and working on national policies in Parliament. MPs who spend three days on constituency work and two days on national policy are most preferred on this dimension of behaviour. However, all MPs who spend at least two days on constituency work are strongly preferred to those who just spend one day a week on that activity. This was measured in both surveys and the patterns are almost identical across the two surveys.

Other attributes

There is no clear effect of the gender of the MP. Neither male nor female MPs are clearly preferred in survey 1, while female MPs are only slightly preferred in survey 2.

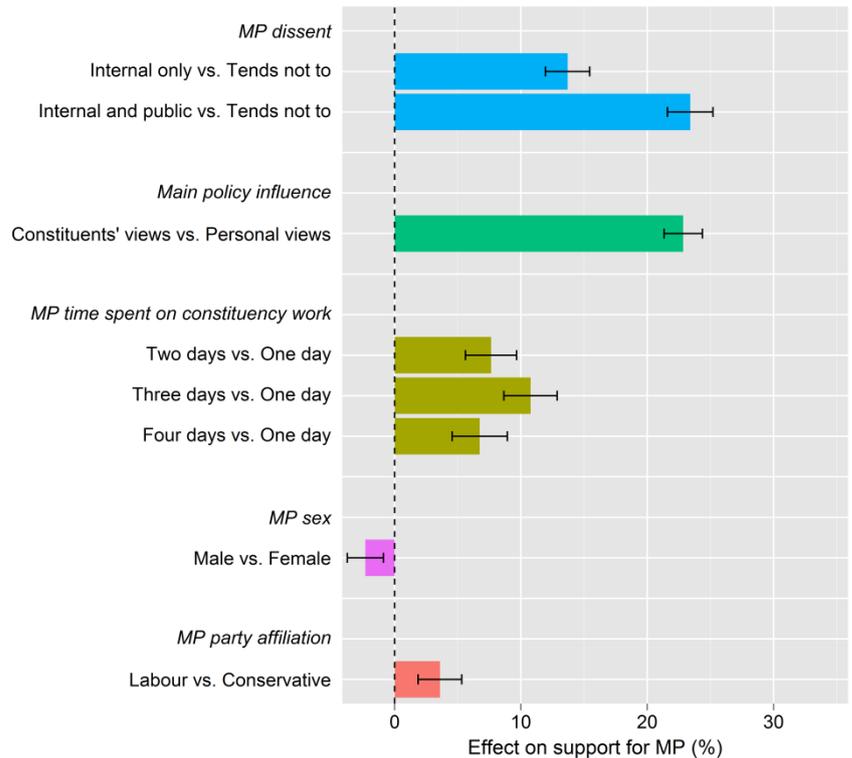
The effect of parliamentary experience is small at best; MPs with 21 years of parliamentary experience are slightly preferred over those who have been in parliament for just three years.

Finally, Labour MPs are slightly preferred to Conservative MPs, in line with vote intention poll results at the time of the surveys.



Survey 1

Survey 2



Note: These plots show the results of the two surveys. MP attributes are listed on the left hand side of each plot. Each bar compares the support for MPs with one level of an attribute to support for those with another level of the attribute. For example, the top bar in the left-hand plot shows that MPs who rarely dissent against their party are 13 per cent more likely to be chosen by voters than are MPs who never do so. The black lines show the margin of error for each comparison. If the black line crosses zero, we cannot be confident that there is any difference in levels of support for the two types of MP.

Implications

This study provides important evidence that **voters have a clear idea of what they want their local Member of Parliament to do**. The party affiliation of an MP is not their only reason for support.

Voters prefer MPs who demonstrate individuality and work hard to **represent their constituency** and who are not beholden to the party line.

If all voters had the type of local MP they want, then they would end up with a Westminster Parliament that is made up of strong-minded, independent MPs who see themselves mainly as representatives of their constituency.

Such a Parliament would of course weaken the role of political parties, who depend on a strong, unified party line to implement their political promises. This presents an important dilemma for party leaders: they may benefit electorally by allowing MPs to rebel occasionally, but may risk being perceived as a

divided party with an incoherent message if this occurs too frequently. It also presents Britain as a nation with a dilemma as to how we want our democracy to operate. Do we want **cohesive parties and governments** that we can hold accountable for political promises, or do we want **more locally responsive MPs and weaker political parties**?

At the same time, the study shows that voters are realistic in their expectations concerning the time MPs spend on **constituency and national policy work**. Their preference is for a **three-day/two-day split** between the two activities.

Encouragingly, **this split in fact matches the average time allocation of the 2010 intake of MPs** who, in a recent study by the Hansard Society, reported spending 60 per cent of their time on constituency work and 40 per cent on Westminster work.

About the Authors

Nick Vivyan is Lecturer in Quantitative Social Research at Durham University. His research focuses on public opinion and electoral politics in Britain, with a particular focus on the MP-constituency link. Nick has published in several leading political science journals, including the *European Journal of Political Science*, *Political Studies* and *Electoral Studies*. Homepage: www.dur.ac.uk/sgia/profiles/?id=9278.

Markus Wagner is Assistant Professor in Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences at the University of Vienna, Austria. His research focuses on party competition and electoral behaviour. Markus has published in various leading political science journals such as the *British Journal of Political Science* and *Comparative Political Studies*. Homepage: homepage.univie.ac.at/markus.wagner.

Further information

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For **further information** on this study, please visit homepage.univie.ac.at/markus.wagner/mpproject.html

Contacts:

Dr Nick Vivyan
Email: nick.vivyan@durham.ac.uk,
Tel: +44 (0)191 33 45881

Mrs Jennifer Jeffes
Senior Engagement Manager
Durham University
Email: jennifer.jeffes@durham.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)191 33 43211